Search Engine Strategies. Conference & Expo Spring 2004 March 1-4 • New York City The Premier Event for Search Engine Marketing & Optimization

Click for a trial download.

TREND MICRO

www.smallbusinesscomputing.com/biztools/article.php/3295811

Back to Article

Alternative Office Suites

By Kevin Savetz
January 7, 2004

You've got to spend money to make money, so they say, but just how much did they say Microsoft Office costs? Office 2003 Standard Edition costs $399 for a single PC.

That's for your basic four-banger suite: word processor, spreadsheet, presentation manager, and e-mail client with contact manager. The Small Business and Professional editions cost $50 and $100 more, respectively. Even considering discounts for volume licensing, the cost of outfitting just a handful of PCs with Office can easily run into thousands of dollars.

That's a lot of money to spend on an office suite, even if you do spend most of your workday cozied up with those four applications. Fortunately, there are alternatives: office suites that let you get your work done on a budget.

Makeshift Suites

Corel's WordPerfect Office is perhaps the most mainstream alternative to Microsoft Office. The major functions in the $299.99 standard edition are the WordPerfect word processor, Quarrto Pro spreadsheet, and a presentation manager. The suite doesn't include an e-mail client, but does include a contact manager that integrates with Microsoft Outlook. There's also a project-guiding utility, 1,000 fonts, clip art, and sundry extras. A free, fully functional trial version is available for download.

If $300 per seat still seems like a bit of a stretch for your budget, take a look at 602 PC Suite. It delivers a word processor, spreadsheet, photo editor, and photo organizer. Presentation graphics software is notably absent, and it and lacks a few of the power-user features that the other suites include, such as macros. But 602 Pro has plenty of power for average users with more modest needs. The program costs $59.95 for three computers or $399.95 for 25 PCs. A free trial version is also available online.

Ability Office from Ability Plus Software includes a relational database and image editing software, in addition to a word processor and spreadsheet. The program costs $49.95, but discounted licensing for more than one PC is not currently available. A 10-day trial version is available for download.

StarOffice and OpenOffice.org, one-two punch from Sun and the open source community, are giving Microsoft Office the biggest run for its money.

Sunnyside of the Street

StarOffice 7 from Sun, includes a word processor, spreadsheet, presentation tool, drawing tool, and database. It is very complete: most users will fine no appreciable trade-off when comparing it to Microsoft Office. Unlike the other programs we're mentioned so far, StarOffice isn't limited to Microsoft Windows: versions are available for Windows, Linux, and Solaris. The files it creates are compatible across platforms, and use an open XML file format. StarOffice costs $79.95 for a single PC, or $60 each for 25 seats.

If you prefer to go to open source route, try OpenOffice.org. A free program based on the StarOffice code, OpenOffice.org is substantially similar, with the same full-featured word processor, spreadsheet, presentation tool, drawing application, and database. It lacks a handful of StarOffice's features, including printed documentation, and third-party clip art and fonts. But it has something that StarOffice lacks: in addition to Windows, Linux, and Solaris, OpenOffice.org is available for Java, FreeBSD, and MacOS X.

OpenOffice.org recently overcame its biggest hurdle to small businesses: a lack of support that StarOffice users enjoy. But Sun recently announced that it will offer per-incident support OpenOffice.org, with the first incident free.

There are yet other choices, including ThinkFree Office for Windows and MacOS and Koffice for Linux.

Go With the Flow — Or No?

Whichever alternative office suite you pick, remember that your company doesn't work in a vacuum. Chances are you have colleagues that use Microsoft Office, so you'll need to be able to read their files. All of these programs claim compatibility with Microsoft's file formats, and for the most part, they do a good job of opening, saving, and displaying those documents. None can promise 100 percent compatibility with Microsoft-format files, because Microsoft doesn't release details about their proprietary file formats. Word processor and spreadsheet documents with an average amount of formatting are generally compatible with these alternative suites.

None of these suites attempt to be Office work-alikes. Give yourself time to learn the commands and intricacies of the one that you choose. Here's where good documentation can make all the difference. For instance, StarOffice and Corel Office both include thick printed manuals. OpenOffice.org is backed by a user-maintained hodgepodge of documentation at support.openoffice.org.

Take the time to try out a few of these alternative office suites and find the one that suits you best. You may find that it keeps you just as productive, and a whole lot more solvent, than Microsoft Office.

Kevin Savetz has been a freelance technology writer for a decade. Savetz's knowledge of small business technology has been published by The Washington Post, Computer Shopper, and The Rotarian. He also operates NetNews Tracker, a free, personalized Usenet search service.

Do you have a comment or question about this article or other small business topics in general? Speak out in the **SmallBusinessComputing.com Forums**. Join the discussion today!